

when a parent **IS IN PRISON**

**The young people who are featured here
are among the 2,400,000 children
who have a mother or father in prison.**

“These children have committed no crime, but the price they are forced to pay is steep. They forfeit, too, much of what matters to them: their homes, their safety, their public status and private self-image, their primary source of comfort and affection. Their lives are profoundly affected . . .”

— Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World*



Mercedes

Jalon



My grandma filled in for my mom
until she came back. So she was kind of acting like my mom.

When my mom was gone,
I'd cry myself to sleep.

I don't really know my dad.

He's still alive but I wonder,
is he getting hurt in jail or something like that?
I want him back so I can be with him.

**I want them around
so we could have a family.**



Jasmine

I felt so sad.

I was just crying.
It just made my head hurt,
my brain hurt,
my stomach hurt.
It just got control of me,
it got my mind twisted,
I couldn't focus on anything else....

A whole lot of days, I **couldn't go to sleep**
without my mom. I had some bad dreams
so my daddy gave me an invisible necklace.
It helps me dream about my mom.
I had a dream that she'd come back. I was walking,
I opened my eyes and saw my mom, and I grabbed her.

I couldn't live without her. It was like a curse, it was
like a prison.

I'm just glad she's back now.



Travis

Dear Dad:

I hope you're doing fine. I prayed for you and I'm going to pray for you tonight. I hope you won't have to have any surgery. I really don't want you to have any surgeries because they hurt. I hope you get your favorite kind of medicine you need to take, a flavor that you like. I went to culture night again and this time I didn't drum. I want to wait until you come home to drum with you because you're my favorite dad and the best dad I could have. I think you're the greatest drum teacher for me. I know one dance move already. And you can teach me some dance moves for the drum. I hope you have a good week.

I love you, Dad.

Travis

Erin



My mom's been in and out of prison

since I was two or three. I have dreams, many dreams: we are all living under one roof, my dad, my mom, my little sister, me and my brother, and my other little sister. All of us in one house. We all have our own room.

I used to **love those dreams.**

Now I just have dreams about my mom dying.

I feel real comfortable talking to my friend Cassandra 'cause she's going through the same thing I'm going through. And the program with Mr. Ted from SKIP (Support for Kids with Incarcerated Parents) has been real helpful. I never used to open up, until he came to the school. I felt like I had

**somebody listening to me,
somebody to talk to.**

Now I know that I'm not the only one who has a problem like this — there's other people in the world that have the same problems.



Jermaine

My father was locked up fifteen years. I asked my mom and stepdad about it. The answers I got said it was something serious, but they weren't going to tell me about it. I waited for them to say something, but they never did. To this day I fear that it could happen to me.

If what happened to him happens to me,
will I react the same way and put myself in the same position?

Growing up was kinda lonely. He wrote letters, but I just skimmed them. It was like he was a stranger — like,
who is this guy, sending these letters?

Having my father in prison changed my life by causing me to be by myself more. And it made me get involved; I try to do things for other people rather than myself. It's almost like A.D.D.— I have to do something,

I have to try to achieve more.
You feel like there's a deeper problem or issue that you gotta solve, but you can't figure out what it is. Maybe one day I'll find out the meaning of all this, why he got locked up and stuff like that. One day it's gonna unravel and I'll find out why. And
hopefully make my life better.

Brittany



I was three when my mom went in.
And then my dad went in, and my mama got out.
And then she went back in.

Life would've been different

if my parents hadn't been in prison. I would have been graduating high school this year, going to senior prom and doing all the other stuff kids do instead of growing up too fast.

I had to grow up real quick.

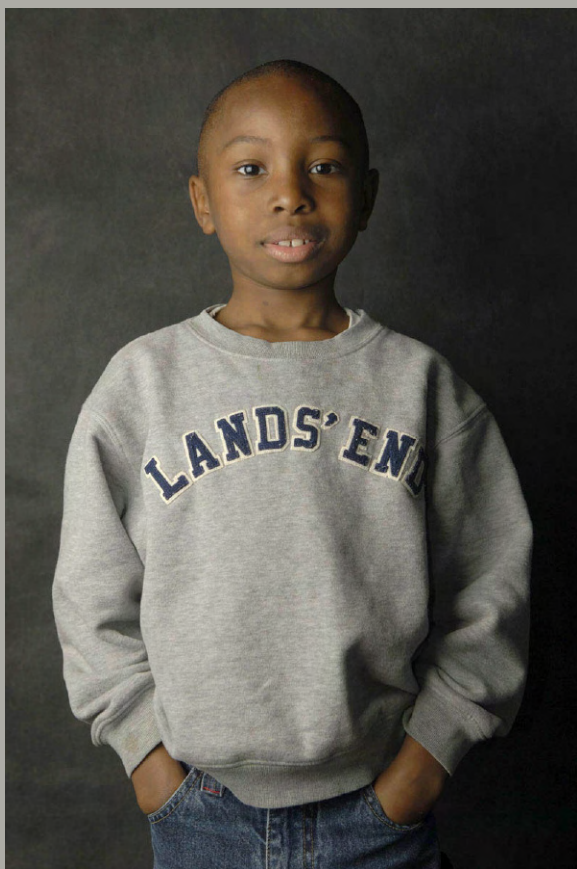
I've lived on the streets,
I've lived with friends, family, boyfriends.
I've done it all.
I'm fixing to be 18, and I never thought I'd make it to see 16.
I thought I'd be dead. But I'm still standing. I'm cheerful.
What I've been through has made me who I am today.
I'm not a weak-minded person. I'm very strong.

I like church. Sometimes I feel God is talking directly to me.
Any church I go to, they say things that relate to me. So I am like, "Dang, is He talking to me?"

If you have a mom or dad locked up, it's not your fault.
It's nobody's fault but theirs; they made their choices.

They decided to go down that road, not you.

Don't feel guilty for their mistakes.



Treyvon

Sometimes I go to see my mom on weekends,
and sometimes when I get out of school,
and sometimes after church.

When I see her I'm real happy.
And when I have to leave, I'm sad.

I wanna be all together.

Brittanie



I hated my mom when she first went in.
I thought she didn't love us. But I also missed her.
I'd feel mad and then I'd just start crying because I knew she
wanted to be with us, that she

did love us.

People would tell me that she wasn't in there because she
didn't love us. She was in there because she made a mistake,
and she did want to get out and be with us.

I had one friend I would talk to about it. Sometimes everyone
tried to make it sound like it was some nice experience, when
it is just bad.

If this does happen to someone, I would tell them to talk to
people instead of keeping it in 'cause it just makes it worse.

And you know that they love you and that they

didn't do it to hurt you;

they just made some mistakes.



Kevin

My daddy was there every day when we woke up. If my step-mom were here, we would see her every day, and it would be happy and everything. And my daddy would have help around the house.

She missed my honors assembly.

Missed a lot of parent-teacher conferences, some parent things where they go to the school and talk to them about how good or bad we been in school.

When she came back, I was at school and my daddy had picked us up. We didn't know that she got out, but there she was in the passenger side, and my sister started crying.



Jasmine

My dad's kind of
on and off going to prison.

When he drinks he gets violent.

I kinda **don't want him** to be a dad to me
because of all the things he's done,

but if he changed,

I would love for him to be a dad to me.

I would like to be able to talk to somebody besides my mom.

That'd be nice, somebody having another opinion
about my life.

Taylor



I remember when they came and got her.

I was sad. I was crying. I was mad at everybody. You could say I was mad at the world. I didn't want to talk to nobody.

At times it's like **I'm mad at her** for not being here, for being locked up. You know, she shouldn't have done what she did. But then again at times I feel sad, 'cause she's there and she's not here with me. I just can't have her around like I want.

I felt like **nobody could understand** what I was going through 'cause they probably didn't have it happen to them.

I do have one friend who understands. One of her parents is in prison. It's better for me to let it out. I don't have to carry around all that weight anymore. At church I praise dance, and I wish she could be there to see that. And just last Wednesday at my school we had a black history play and I was in that. I wish she could've seen that.

I want other kids to know that even though your parents are locked up, they're not bad people. They just did something that they shouldn't have done. And I want them to know that. As long as we have **someone who's there to help us**, we can get through it.

It makes you stronger —

I know it's made me stronger.

You have to grow up fast.

Shanika



I don't know why he's in there.

I heard so many different stories.
So I just wait until I find out the truth.

I don't want no part of him

because he wasn't even around when I was growing. I don't want to see no letters or anything. It was his loss all these years. When he gets out, I don't need him to be coming in, messing up what I have. I'll just focus on school. I'd rather stay on track. I don't think of him — I'm in my own world.

My friend, the way I can relate to her is that her father died.

I know how it feels to have a loss.

My grandma tells me, and a lot of my teachers, everybody says, "You're very mature for your age." At first I didn't even know what it means; I used to be like, What is mature? Is that a bad thing or a good thing? But now I know.



Anabel

My father started getting arrested when I was around five. And my brother is in prison. I was always pressured to keep things together, 'cause everything was so chaotic. I just **wanted to be free of problems**. I thought if I moved as far away as possible, I wouldn't have to deal with anything. But being far away didn't stop the fact that I still have to deal with everything.

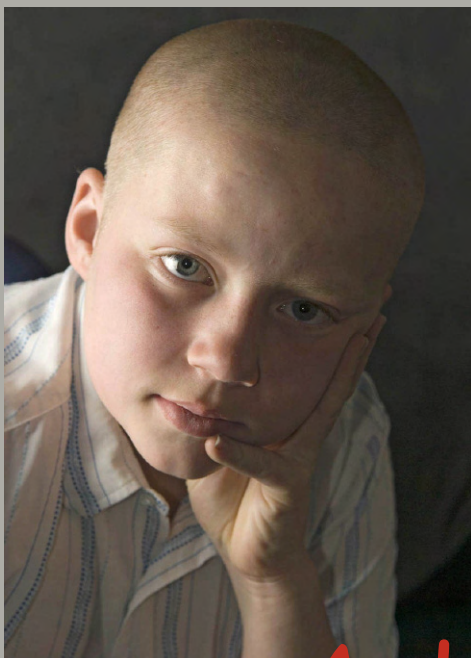
It was something you **weren't supposed to talk about** outside the house. Once I got older, I found friends I trusted and actually talked about it. But sometimes you wonder how much good it is really to talk about it. My friends can sympathize, but they don't really know what it is like.

I'm trying to find **some way to express everything I'm feeling** through my artwork. But I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with explaining it.

When I watch my baby, it's inspiring.
My son is the best thing that could have happened to me.

Family is central.

Even though it often didn't work, sometimes it does.



Andrew

I was 9 when he went in. Now I'm 11.

It makes me kind of

angry and sad.

It's hard that I really don't get to spend any time with him.

I wish he could

get his life

straightened out.

Maranda



I would be thinking about my mom
before I went to sleep. I had a counselor but I didn't talk
to her. I just talked to her about problems with my friends
'cause I don't like spreading that around about my mom.

Because it makes me sad.

It felt good when

my mom came back.

And when **my dad comes back,**

I want to take him out to eat, and go swimming,
and do other things.

Go to the movies.



Patrick

Visits with my dad are fine.

I can get to touch him...

well, I did get to touch him.

Sometimes he just starts talking a lot and getting up on

where his life is

and then I start getting up on **how my life is.**

He asks me lots of questions, I ask him questions,
and we write each other.

When I was little I used to be scared and people were always
trying to talk about it. Some of their parents are not in jail;
they just have an easy life. And my life is kinda horrible,
kinda bad.

There's so much to do with him that I haven't even done yet.
I haven't had Christmas with him...I haven't had Valentine's
with him...**haven't done nothing.** Haven't had New Years
with him.

Nothin'.

I pray for him every night, so God can let him get out for one
year. Like, it ain't over yet, 'cause last year I told God to let
him get out for one year, but all I know is **it's not over yet,**
'cause this year's not over.

DeeDee



When I first went down to the prison it was real hard being able to hug my mama and touch her and then can't take her with me...it was hard, we all cried, but now I'm just used to it. But **I miss my mama and I need her.**

I really had to be the mama for my sisters – I wanted things to be right for them. My aunt says I've never really been able to be a child. Now that I'm 18, it's just like I'm 21 or something.

It's like I'm still older than I really am.

Now my aunt says I should be able to have a little bit of that childhood that I never got to have back then.

I used to be ashamed to say my mom is in prison.

But then my auntie told me that **it's not my fault,** so it's nothing I should be ashamed of, it's nothing I did.

I do have a friend who goes to the same school and her mama and my mama are down there together. I can talk to her 'cause she knows how I'm feeling inside – she's been there. I'll probably have kids by the time mama gets out. Taking them to the jailhouse – that's not where I want them to remember her from.

I just want people to be proud of me.

That's why **I keep going.**

I'm a very cheerful person.

They say at school that I just brighten up people's day.



Jessie

My stepdad **writes me** a lot.
I write back and I write my brother back too.
My brother is getting out, though, like in two months.
I tell them we're gonna play war.
It's like paintball but there are little bitty plastic BBs.
Play in the backyard,
out in the woods.
I wanna go out in the woods.

Cassandra



I missed a lot.

Like last year, at my school there was a father-daughter dance.
My friends asked me what I was wearing and I said I wasn't
going. I had bought the dress — I don't know why.
I was looking at the dress, imagining just me and my dad.

I just started crying.

That's what makes me miss my father the most.

Sometimes when I'm alone,

I sit there and look up and close my eyes and think,

"If he were here, what would happen?"

I would have had my full life; it's just half now.

I'm starting not to care about it:

he's there,

I'm over here,

and I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do.

My sweet sixteen birthday, I've been planning and planning it.

I want a circle with me coming out, with my partner,

and then he hands me over to my dad.

Then it hits me, my dad **isn't gonna be there.**

It has to be my grandfather.

It's gonna be that way — I might as well

get used to it.



Jacob

Mommy, remember when you was in jail?
I was really, really sad.
Sad that you didn't come home.

I love you.

Lisa: I've very lucky and fortunate. I mean,
this kid loves me!

He won't let me out of his sight.

He says, "Mama, why did you go to jail?"
I say, "I wasn't being good, Jacob;
that's what happens."



Sasha

I was three when he got locked up.
I have some memories — like we were at the circus and we
were riding on an elephant.

It had to be a dream.

When he was in prison I had this grudge against him for
not being there for me. When I finally got a chance to talk
to him, and he let me know what really happened, I'm like,
“Oh, I didn't know that.” I had jumped to so many
conclusions. I had a new-found respect for him, and I
realized he really did love me.

Sometimes now I dream about a situation that has happened
to me — I know he wasn't there, but he'll be there this time.
He'll be talking to me, like my conscience. He'll talk me
through it. He'll be the person that takes the mask off
everything and

tells me how it really is.

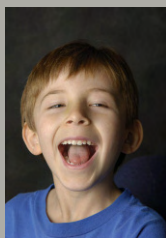
*(Sasha's father was on death row. His conviction was
overturned; he was released, then died five years later of
untreated hepatitis.)*



Latrell

Latrell's father, who he never met and only spoke to once on the phone, is in prison. His stepfather has been in and out of prison, and his mother, who was also in prison, died recently of a drug overdose. He lives with his grandmother.

I don't really talk about it.



Children of Incarcerated Parents:
A BILL OF RIGHTS

I have the right...

- 1** to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
- 2** to be heard when decisions are made about me.
- 3** to be considered when decisions are made about my parents.
- 4** to be well cared for in my parent's absence.
- 5** to speak with, see and touch my parent.
- 6** to support as I face my parent's incarceration.
- 7** not to be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
- 8** to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

— By Gretchen Newby & Nell Bernstein

The young people featured in this exhibit are predominately children of color. This reflects the reality of prison in the United States — not because of differences in overall offending, but because of policies and conditions that impact communities of color most heavily. The burden of incarceration, however, affects all of us.

“The dissolution of families, the harm to children – and the resultant perpetuation of the cycle of crime and incarceration from one generation to the next – may be the most profound and damaging effect of our current penal structure.”

— Nell Bernstein, *All Alone in the World*

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SOON AVAILABLE!

— the book based on this project
 from Good Books (www.goodbks.com)